

A Participatory Approach in Neighborhood Planning

- A case of regeneration plan in Nanshi district of Yining city

The city of Yining is located in the Yili Valley of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in northwestern China. It used to be an important town on the ancient Silk Route linking China and Europe. The study area, Nanshi district, is a traditional Muslim residential district covering about 12 square kilometers in the city's old town that is built up with low-rise and high-density courtyard houses. It has 87,000 inhabitants from 25 ethnic groups in which 12% are



elderly people and 65% are from Uygur ethnic group.

The area has distinctive characteristics and rich Uygur culture and tradition. The courtyards and buildings are largely well preserved with local and traditional features. There are more than 300 human-scaled streets and alleys in the district. Many of them are well aligned with ditches, trees and blossoms. Many courtyard walls are colorfully painted and gates delicately designed to add a fine taste to this quiet and amiable neighborhood.

Behind this pleasant scene however, the area has been losing its economic vitality in the last few decades and suffered from poverty, unemployment and insufficient infrastructure. For example most streets and alleys are not paved with hard materials and therefore become very muddy and difficult to walk on during the rainy days. There is also insufficient provision of sewage network and garbage collecting stations.



In addition, the City Master Plan formulated two years ago tends to ignore the human-scaled spatial pattern of the old town by promoting large-scale redevelopment and simply copying the gridiron network of wide streets for echoing the spatial pattern of the new districts. This has endangered the old town with potential risk of dismantling many courtyard houses and displacing local residents, as well as disconnecting existing community network.

At the neighborhood level, there is little regulation over renovation and refurbishment. As most houses are privately owned, it has to depend largely on self-consciousness of citizens to preserve historical features and use traditional materials when they renovate their houses.

This would lead to a risk of losing the district's traditional identity that may be a valuable resource for revitalizing local economy through various means, e.g. developing tourism.

China Academy of Urban Planning and Design was commissioned by the Ministry of Construction in 2006 to undertake the regeneration plan for the district. The project received active supports from central, regional and local governments with the objectives on improving infrastructure and environment, preserving local features and traditions, stimulating local economy and creating jobs, and facilitating social progress to build a harmonious community.



Although the task was topped down from the Ministry of Construction, the planning approach was rather a bottom-up and participatory process aimed at the following targets: to thoroughly understand the local situation and needs, to facilitate better communication and build up trust between the government, the planners and the public, and to enhance the community's sense of belonging and prevent from potential social conflicts.

There are three major participants in the Yining project: the government, the citizens and the planners. The government's role is to set out legal and administrative frameworks for safeguarding plan making and the forthcoming implementation. The citizens' role is not only to passively receive information from the planners, but also to actively appraise and help modifying the planning options and eventually select the most preferred one that would subsequently be modified into the final plan. The planners' role is to act not only as a traditional plan maker but also as a mediator, a facilitator, a negotiator and a communicator.



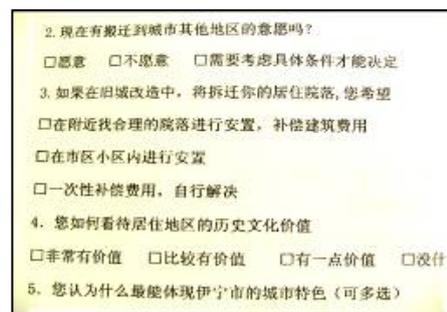
The planners designed five steps for the plan-making process in order to facilitate public participation throughout the period: (1) announcing the planning initiation to the public at the early stage, (2) consulting public opinions including distributing a questionnaire for drafting planning options at the second stage, (3) hosting public meetings for appraising the options at the third stage, (4) hosting public meetings for finalizing the plan at the fourth stage, (5)



exhibiting the final plan to the public at the last stage.

At the first and second stages, a number of meetings with the Street Offices (governmental agencies in the neighborhood), local imams (Muslim leaders) and local citizens were organized under the assistance of the city planning authority. The planners also walked into many local houses to investigate the building conditions and listen to the residents about their daily needs, as well as finding out their working skills. This helped to arouse public awareness on planning and allowed the planners to have face-to-face communication with the community for better understanding the existing situation.

A questionnaire was designed to collect basic data and information from the public, which covers major issues of their daily life such as household information, building conditions, neighborhood environment, residents' needs and their desires on environmental improvement. Women, children and the elderly people turned out to be the frequent users of local public space, which called for serious planning consideration at the later stages. Other specific local needs were also collected through conducting the questionnaire, for example there is a need to provide open spaces for piling up snow cleared away from roofs and alleys in the winters. Staff from the local Street Office helped to translate the questionnaire into Uyghur language so that it was bilingually conducted to meet the local requirement. The questionnaire was then distributed to 1500 households and later received about 1000 feedbacks, which make up a general valid sample rate of 5.3% in the district.



Through in-depth investigation and communication with the community, the planners gained much understandings about the local customs and traditions: citizens are ardently devoted to Islam and have regular daily religious activities; they also have strong sense of belonging and very much treasure the neighborhood life and its environment; they regard the Mosques and the peripheries as major places for public meeting; they pay much attention to cleanliness and



hygiene, and like to plant trees and flowers in the neighborhood; they like to host family parties in the courtyards especially in the occasions like weddings and funerals; they are good at singing and dancing and have great cordiality and hospitality; many people have skills in making local cuisines and crafts; most women do not go out to work but manage housework at home, and they like to chat with each other at the courtyard gates.

Planning options were then worked out in the areas of protecting and enhancing local features of the buildings and public space, streamlining circulation and improving conditions of the

streets and alleys, installing a sewage network, providing more service facilities, and developing family-based folk tourism.

At the third stage, an exhibition was open to the citizens after the completion of the draft plan with easy-to-read planning options to allow better apprehension by the public. For example, the proposed streets and areas with options of material changes are highlighted in the maps. Citizens potentially affected by these changes were fully informed and consulted for their opinions. A number of design details were also simulated in 2D or 3D images, such as the location of ditches, the layout of sewage pipes, and, the conceptions of green spaces, streetscape and building styles.



Feedbacks collected from the citizens were then analyzed and accommodated into the later plan.

At the same time, a drawing-and-writing competition was performed in local primary and secondary schools with the topic of “my dream hometown” which aroused the young generation’s aspiration for building a prosperous neighborhood and their awareness of preserving local traditions and characteristics in future development.

At the fourth stage, three public meetings were successfully organized for finalizing the plan, which later received overwhelming support from the community due to the early-stage public involvement. A number of measures such as paving the streets and installing sewage pipes were also implemented at the ground to demonstrate the joint resolution of the government, the planners and the citizens.



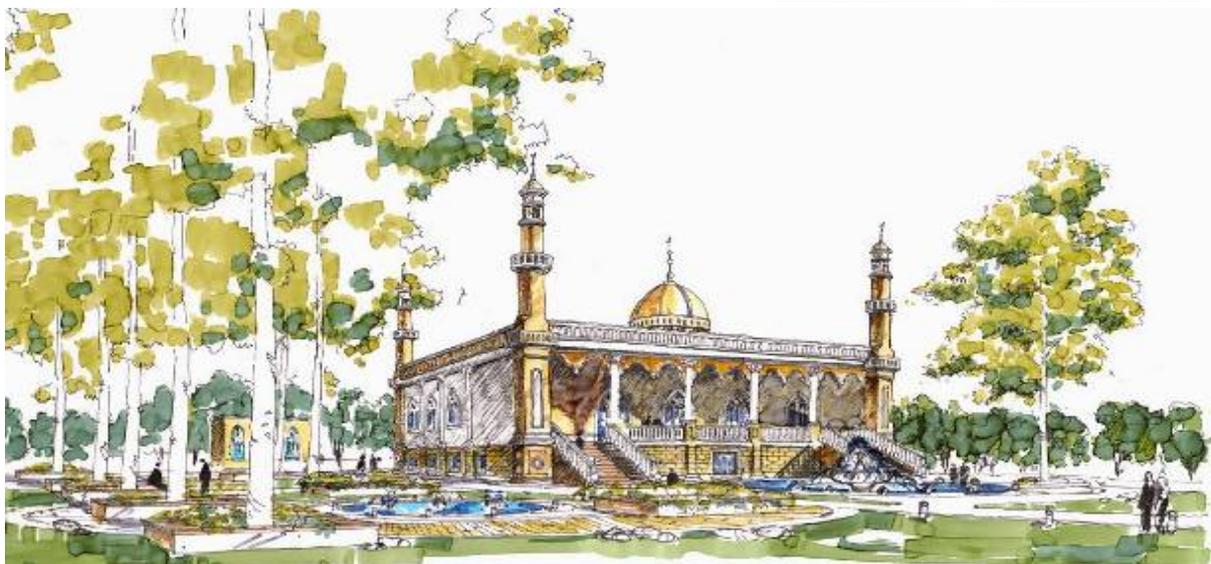
Although the Yining project is now waiting for its final stage of public exhibition and the approval of the local congress for embracing a full-scale implementation, we have to admit that it still has limitations and challenges. First of all, as the area has long been suffering poverty and insufficient infrastructure, the initial interests of the government, the planners and the citizens are highly clear and cohesive, so that it is easier for them to jointly work and tackle the problems than in many other areas where interests are more diversified. Second, the implementation of the regeneration project in Yining is still solely funded by the government and is lacking the developers’ participation.

Public-private partnership has not yet been built for keeping long-term sustainable development of the old districts.

Public participation as an academic concept has only been introduced into China for less than 20 years. Mainstream planning in China is still largely adopting a rational approach with planners acting as technocrats in the decision making process, although some trials of communicative approach have been practiced in the form of consulting the public for their comments on the planning products, for example in Shenzhen where public consultation has become a legal requirement.

Yining project seems to be ice breaking and is believed to have a profound impact on China's urban planning course in the sense of using various means to get public involved from the very beginning of the planning process.

I would like to conclude my article by quoting a paragraph of a composition written by a secondary school student in the drawing-and-writing competition organized by our planners to wish the Nanshi district a brighter future:



There exists a new place in the world where people can enjoy satisfactory life. That is the Nanshi district which now has a surprisingly new look. The houses there all look like well-designed villas, spacious and full of natural light. Flowers blossom in the courtyards to let people feel the spring. Our school campus is full of flourishing trees and flowers too. Streets are paved without traffic jams but a Love Crew always shuttles to take the elderly and the disabled to where they want to go. There is a so-called Health Street decorated with water scene and trees and flowers for the kids and their grandparents to exercise their bodies. At



the end of the Street is an illuminated sports field where people can play basketball and other games in the evenings. The residents are willing to help each other and they all live in harmony and unity...Let's make great efforts together to build a better future for my dear hometown – the Nanshi District.

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